A Study in Reformed Eschatology

The Last Things: Death, Resurrection, and Judgment

Based on the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapters 31 and 32

Abstract

The Christian faith rests upon revealed truth concerning not only what God has done in history, but what He has promised to bring to pass at the end of history. These final realities, which theologians have long called eschatology, are not peripheral concerns for the curious but foundational convictions that shape how the believer lives, grieves, hopes, and witnesses in the present age. This study draws upon the teaching contained in Chapters 31 and 32 of the 1689 London Baptist Confession of Faith, examining three great doctrines that together form the capstone of historic Reformed theology: the intermediate state of the soul following death, the bodily resurrection of the dead at the last day, and the final judgment of all mankind before the throne of the Lord Jesus Christ.

These doctrines are not speculative. They are the testimony of God's own Word, woven throughout both the Old and New Testaments and articulated with care by the framers of the confession. The goal of this study is to present these truths to the believer in a way that makes them living, practical convictions rather than abstract theological categories. For the person in Christ, the truths explored here are a source of profound hope and comfort. For the person outside of Christ, they stand as a solemn and earnest warning.

Introduction: The Figurative Language of Paul

The Apostle Paul opens our understanding of these great themes in Second Corinthians 5:1-10. Writing with the practical knowledge of a man who had made tents with his own hands, Paul describes the human body as a kind of tent, a temporary dwelling. This is not a dismissal of the body. It is rather a pointer to the fact that this present form of bodily existence is not the final word. There is, the Apostle declares, a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. These words set the stage for everything that follows in our study.

The confession's final two chapters, Chapters 31 and 32, represent a fitting conclusion to its teaching. Having walked through the doctrines of God, creation, humanity, sin, grace, the covenants, the church, and the sacraments, the writers of the confession now bring us to the end of redemptive history. What awaits the Christian at death? What will happen to all humanity on the last day? What is the purpose of the final judgment, and how should the certainty of that day shape the way we live right now? These are the questions this study intends to answer.

Part One: The Intermediate State

The Question Every Person Asks

There is perhaps no question more universally human than the one we find addressed in the first paragraph of Chapter 31 of the confession: what happens when a person dies? This question has occupied the minds of poets and philosophers, of kings and peasants, of believers and skeptics alike. Our culture has no shortage of answers. Books, television programs, films, and magazine articles all offer their theories, many of them colorful and most of them utterly at odds with the clear teaching of Scripture.

The confession does not give us speculation. It brings us to what God has revealed in His Word, and what God has revealed is both clear and sufficient. The first paragraph of Chapter 31 makes a foundational distinction that runs throughout both testaments of Scripture: the distinction between the body and the soul.

Body and Soul: The Biblical Distinction

At death, the body and the soul are separated. The body, being material and visible, begins the process of returning to the dust from which it came. The soul, being immaterial, returns to the God who made it. This is not merely a philosophical assertion. It is the testimony of Scripture from Genesis to Revelation.

> ***Genesis 3:19*** ***"****For you are dust, and to dust you shall return."*
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> ***Acts 13:36*** ***"****For David, after he had served the purpose of God in his own generation, fell asleep and was laid with his fathers and saw corruption."*
>
> ***Ecclesiastes 12:7*** ***"****And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it."*

In light of this, the most accurate biblical definition of death is not simply the stopping of the heart or the cessation of brain activity. Those are the physical symptoms that accompany death. Death itself is the separation of the body and the soul. This is precisely what James means when he writes in Chapter 2, verse 26, that as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead.

Once this separation has occurred, the soul does not die. The soul does not enter into a dreamless sleep. The soul continues in a state of full and conscious existence. This is what distinguishes biblical Christianity from the doctrine of what some have called soul sleep, and it is what makes the second sentence of the confession's first paragraph so significant.

The Righteous in the Intermediate State

The souls of the righteous are, upon death, made perfect in holiness. There is no more ongoing sanctification in this state. The struggle against sin that marks the Christian life in this present age is over. No more sinful anger. No more misuse of the tongue. No more lust, pride, or the need for repentance. The souls of those who are in Christ are received into paradise and behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.

This is precisely the hope that animated the Apostle Paul throughout his ministry. In Philippians 1:23, he speaks of his desire to depart and be with Christ, calling it far better than what even this present life of fruitful gospel ministry affords. And our Lord Himself, in His mercy toward the dying thief on the cross, spoke the promise recorded in Luke 23:43: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise."

Let us be precise about what the intermediate state is and is not for the righteous. It is a state of great blessedness. The Christian is with Christ, and that is a reality of such magnitude that Paul could scarcely find words adequate to express his longing for it. Yet the intermediate state is not the final state either. The confession is clear on this point, and so is Scripture. The righteous in the intermediate state are still waiting, still anticipating something more. That something more is the resurrection of the body.

In Revelation 6:10, the souls of those who had been slain for the Word of God cry out in a loud voice, asking how long before the Lord judges the inhabitants of the earth. They are in His

presence, yes. They are at peace, yes. But the full redemption of their persons, body and soul reunited in glory, awaits the last day.

The Wicked in the Intermediate State

The confession also speaks plainly about the intermediate state of those who die outside of saving faith in Christ Jesus. For the wicked, there is no paradise, no beholding of the face of God in light and glory. Their souls are cast into hell, where they remain in torment and utter darkness, reserved for the judgment of the great day.

It is worth pausing here to note what Scripture does not teach. It does not teach the existence of any middle place, any state of temporary punishment followed by release. The Word of God knows nothing of purgatory. Scripture speaks of but two destinations at death, and the believer who stands on the sufficiency and authority of God's Word must be willing to say plainly what that Word says, however unpopular the saying may be in our age.

The intermediate state of the wicked is one of conscious torment and spiritual darkness. It is the absence of the light of Christ. And it is not their final state. The wicked, like the righteous, are waiting for the last day. For them, that day is not a day of hope. It is the day of the great harvest that Jesus described in Matthew 13, when the weeds are gathered and burned with fire. Brothers and sisters, when we contemplate the reality of this, how our hearts ought to be burdened for those who are outside of Christ.

Part Two: The Resurrection of the Dead

The Last Day

Paragraphs two and three of Chapter 31 of the confession move us from the intermediate state to what happens on the last day. The last day is the day of the resurrection. There is, of course, considerable debate among Christians about the precise details and sequence of the events surrounding the Lord's return. Yet on this point, the confession is clear, and more importantly, our Lord Jesus Christ Himself is clear.

> ***John 6:39 "****And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day."*

The resurrection and the last day are connected. The rising of Christ's people takes place on the last day. And when that day comes, there is a distinction to be made between those believers who have died before it and those who are still living when it arrives.

The Dead in Christ and the Living

The confession distinguishes between paragraphs two and three of Chapter 31 in an important way. Paragraph two describes the event of the resurrection itself. Paragraph three describes the end result of that event. The Apostle Paul provides the most extended biblical treatment of this in his first letter to the Thessalonians, Chapter 4, verses 13 through 18.

For those who have died in the Lord, their souls, which have been in the presence of Christ during the intermediate state, will be reunited at the resurrection with their bodies. These bodies will be raised. For those believers who are still living when Christ returns, something equally marvelous will occur. They will be changed, transformed in an instant, in what the Apostle Paul in First Corinthians 15 calls the twinkling of an eye. The mortal will put on immortality. Death will be swallowed up in victory.

> ***1 Corinthians 15:55,57 "****O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? ... But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."*

The Encouragement of the Resurrection

The Apostle Paul closes his great passage in First Thessalonians 4 with a pastoral instruction that cuts directly to the heart of why these doctrines matter: "Therefore encourage one another with these words." These truths are not given to us for the purpose of filling notebooks or winning theological arguments. They are given to us so that we might live differently, grieve differently, and hope differently.

It must be admitted that many of us live too much in the grip of present circumstances. The pressures and burdens of the present age tend to overshadow the great realities of what is to come. But we are meant to look forward. We are meant to be a people whose hearts are genuinely uplifted by the hope of what lies ahead. The resurrection of the dead is not a cold doctrinal category; it is the Christian's living hope.

Titus 2:13,14 *"Waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works."*

Part Three: The Final Judgment

A Day Appointed

Chapter 32 of the confession addresses the great Day of Judgment. It contains three paragraphs, and their progression is instructive. The first paragraph describes the fact of the final judgment. The second paragraph describes the results and purposes of that judgment. The third paragraph describes the practical effects that the certainty of judgment ought to have upon us in the present.

The first paragraph of Chapter 32 teaches that God the Father has appointed a specific day for this judgment. It is a fixed day. No created being knows the day or the hour. That knowledge belongs to God alone. The language of the confession on this point reflects the language of Acts 17:30 and 31, where Paul preaches to the philosophers in Athens that God has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed.

The Judge: Christ Jesus

Who is the central figure in this judgment? It is the Lord Jesus Christ. All power and all judgment have been given by the Father to the eternal Son. This is the testimony of the confession, and it is the testimony of our Lord Himself in John 5:22 through 29.

The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son. The dead will hear the voice of the Son of God. Those who have done good will come to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment. The centrality of the Lord Jesus Christ in all of this cannot be overstated. He is not merely an instrument of judgment. He is the judge, the one to whom all authority has been given, the one who will receive all honor in that day.

King David, facing a terrible choice of punishments in Second Samuel 24, said to the prophet Gad, "Let me fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is very great." Brothers and sisters, let us fall into those same hands. For those who are in Christ Jesus, this judge is not a stranger. He is our Savior.

Who Will Be Judged and for What

The confession is equally clear about who will appear before this judgment and what they will be judged for. All persons that have ever lived upon the earth will give an account of their thoughts, their words, and their deeds. No one is exempt. Every knee shall bow. The Apostle Paul makes this plain in Romans 14:10 through 12, and our Savior makes it plain in Matthew 25:31 through 33, where all the nations are gathered before Him and He separates the sheep from the goats.

And the standard of that judgment? Thoughts, words, and deeds done in the body, that is, in this present life. Jesus teaches in Matthew 12:36 and 37 that men will give an account for every careless word they have spoken. Paul writes in Romans 2:16 that God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus. There will be no deception in that court. There will be no lies, no evasions, no carefully crafted appearances. All will be laid bare before the righteous judge.

What a solemn reality this is. And yet for the believer in Christ, how glorious. The very one who will judge all things is the one who has clothed us in His righteousness. There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Micah 7:19 assures us that He will cast all our sins into the depths of the sea. The Day of Judgment is not a day of dread for the Christian. It is the day when God vindicates His people and commends those who have been faithful in Him.

The Purpose of Judgment

Paragraph two of Chapter 32 describes the goal that God has in view in appointing this day of judgment. That goal is the manifestation of the glory of His mercy in the elect, and the manifestation of the glory of His justice in the eternal condemnation of the reprobate. This is not an incidental consequence of judgment. It is the designed end.

This goal reaches all the way back to the eternal purposes of God established before the foundation of the world, the decree of God that the confession addressed in its third chapter. All of redemptive history has been moving toward this moment. At last, God will be glorified in the fullness of what He is. The blessings bestowed upon the righteous will declare the glory of His mercy. The punishment meted out upon the wicked will declare the glory of His justice. All of existence will be seen to have been oriented toward the praise of the God who is, and who was, and who is to come.

How Then Shall We Live

The final paragraph of Chapter 32, which is also the final paragraph of the entire confession, does not leave us in the realm of abstract theology. It brings us home with a question of immense practical weight: since there will be a Day of Judgment, how shall we then live?

First, the certainty of judgment ought to deter us from sin. It is a warning against all hypocrisy and duplicity. The person who lives one way in public and another way in private does so in the vain hope that no one will notice. The Day of Judgment announces that everything done in secret will one day be made known. This ought to make us serious about the pursuit of holiness.

Second, the certainty of judgment ought to be a tremendous consolation for the righteous. We live in a world where injustice seems to prosper and the wicked seem to have the upper hand. We see slander go unanswered. We see the name of Christ dishonored. We see laws and customs in our land becoming more and more depraved. We feel the weight of a world in rebellion against God. But a day is coming when all of these things will be dealt with by the righteous judge of all the earth. This ought to give us genuine hope and patience.

Third, the certainty of judgment, and in particular the patience of God in delaying the return of Christ, ought to be a powerful motivation for evangelism. The Apostle Peter addresses this directly in his second letter, Chapter 3, verses 8 and 9, writing that the Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward us, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. Every day the Lord delays His coming is another day in which a loved one, a neighbor, a friend has the opportunity to repent and believe. As witnesses for our great Savior, we ought to be earnestly imploring people to be reconciled to God through Christ.

Conclusion

The three great doctrines we have examined in this study, the intermediate state, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment, are not isolated theological propositions. They are the capstone of the whole story of redemption. They answer the questions that press upon every human heart. What happens when I die? Will there be a resurrection? Will there be justice in the end?

God has not left us to guess. He has spoken in His Word. He has told us that the souls of the righteous go immediately to be with Christ at death, perfected in holiness and awaiting the

redemption of their bodies. He has told us that on the last day, Christ will return, and the dead will be raised and reunited with their bodies, while those who are alive will be transformed in an instant. He has told us that all of humanity will stand before the judgment seat of Christ, and that on that day, His mercy and His justice will be fully and finally displayed in the sight of all creation.

These are truths to live by. They are truths to grieve by, for they remind us that death is not the end and that those who die in the Lord rest in His presence. They are truths to hope by, for the resurrection is our blessed hope and the Day of Judgment is the day when all wrongs are made right. And they are truths to witness by, for as long as the Lord delays His coming, there are souls that have not yet heard the gospel of grace.

God has done great things. He has given us light from His Word on life after death, the resurrection of the dead, and the final judgment. Let us use these great truths to commit ourselves and all that we have to Christ, for He alone is worthy of such commitment.

Study and Discussion Questions

Part One: The Intermediate State

1. What is the biblical distinction between body and soul, and why does it matter for understanding what happens at death?

2. How does the Apostle Paul's figurative language of a tent in Second Corinthians 5 help us understand the nature of the body in relation to what lies ahead?

3. What does Scripture teach about the experience of the righteous in the intermediate state? What are they experiencing, and what are they still awaiting?

4. Why is the doctrine of the intermediate state important as a correction to the idea of soul sleep or unconscious existence after death?

5. What does Scripture teach about the intermediate state of the wicked? What practical effect should this knowledge have on our hearts toward those outside of Christ?

Part Two: The Resurrection of the Dead

6. Why is the bodily resurrection so central to the Christian faith? What would be lost if we only spoke of the soul being with Christ, without the resurrection of the body?

7. What distinction does the confession make between believers who have already died and those who are alive when Christ returns? How does First Thessalonians 4 and First Corinthians 15 inform this distinction?

8. The Apostle Paul instructed the Thessalonians to encourage one another with the truths of the resurrection and the last day. Do you find that these truths genuinely encourage and lift your spirit? If not, what might need to change in how you are meditating on them?

Part Three: The Final Judgment

9. Who is the central figure in the final judgment, and what does Scripture teach about the authority that has been entrusted to Him?

10. The confession teaches that all persons who have ever lived will give an account of their thoughts, words, and deeds. How does this reality speak to the temptation toward secret or hidden sin?

11. How should a Christian think about the Day of Judgment? In what sense is it a day of consolation rather than dread for those who are in Christ?

12. The Apostle Peter connects the patience of God in delaying the return of Christ to the opportunity for repentance. How should this truth shape the way we think about and engage in evangelism?

A Closing Question for Personal Reflection

Scripture speaks of but two destinations at death, and but two outcomes at the final judgment. On the basis of God's Word alone, where do you stand? Are you in Christ, clothed

in His righteousness, with the certain hope of the resurrection and the blessed assurance of no condemnation? If so, how are these truths shaping the way you live today?

Key Scripture References

The following passages are central to the themes of this study and are commended for further personal meditation and memorization.

Genesis 3:19, Ecclesiastes 12:7, Acts 13:36, Second Corinthians 5:1 to 10, Luke 23:43, Philippians 1:23, Revelation 6:10, First Thessalonians 4:13 to 18, First Corinthians 15:50 to 57, Titus 2:11 to 14, John 5:22 to 29, John 6:39, Acts 17:30 to 31, Romans 14:10 to 12, Matthew 25:31 to 46, Matthew 12:36 to 37, Romans 2:16, Romans 8:1, Psalm 103:12, Micah 7:19, Revelation 22:12, Second Peter 3:8 to 12.